SYSTEM AND DIALOGUE

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> Man only understands himself when he has experimentally tested the intelligibility of his words on others.
>
> Wilhelm von Humboldt

In the discussion that follows (and some may wish to read it as a polemic), I shall attempt to bring together certain notions about grammatical system as they appear in the Anglo-American tradition and other recent Continental ideas about the innate complexities of human speech and to discuss their relevance to students desiring fluency in a foreign language.*

At present most teachers and many students enter the classroom assuming that a foreign language can be best taught by taking grammar to be a systematic instrument comprising a finite set of rules by which a speaker encodes meanings into understandable structures and by which a listener understands them through the application of the same tool in the opposite direction.

While few teachers today advocate filling classroom time with lengthy explanations of the precise rules for the use of this tool, a significant number still feel it their responsibility to train students to construct the sentences of the language they are learning by means of some such instrumentalist theory of grammar, or, if they count themselves among the more innovative, they see their function to be the leading of students to the competent use of another language by helping them internalize the grammatical system while avoiding reference to traditional terminology.

* I would like here to express my appreciation to Dr. Brendan Wilson of Tokyo University for his valuable criticisms concerning this presentation.

The scientific study of language is most assuredly a fascinating and vitally important object of academic concern. Philology, historical and comparative linguistics, traditional and generative grammar, socio- and psycholinguistics, semantics, and a dozen other subdisciplines have an undeniable claim to academic attention. But when scientific dedication to these subjects frustrates other useful investigations into the nature of language or intrudes itself into the language classroom to interfere with the learning of a language as a communicative activity, those students whose career aims or cultural goals depend upon the fluent use of a second language — that is to say the majority of serious students are being short changed.

This is not to deny the value to the student of the study of grammar, either as the art by which lucid prose is created or as an abstract scientific activity whose goal it is to more fully understand human behavior. The position I wish to take here is that the pursuit of an elegant prose style or a familiarity with the more subtle aspects of the cognitive processes is better carried out by those who are already fluent speakers of a language and not imposed upon students who have the more pragmatic goal of developing fluency in a foreign language.

Certainly a basic understanding of grammar is indispensable at the early stages of language learning. I would suggest, however, that students enter the foreign language classroom with a sound grammatical understanding of their native language rather than the hope of there learning an alien one. There is far too much to be learned about the pragmatics of how and when and where a foreign language is used, to spend valuable classroom time in discussing the stylistics of half-understood passages or the complex inner workings of some vaguely comprehended grammatical structure.

It is to the broad question of what the activity of language learning embraces, and what it might best exclude, that I wish to draw attention. I would like first to discuss the theoretical basis for most of contemporary language teaching, and then, on the basis of some important philosophical concerns raised by the writings of such European scholars

as Mikhail Bakhtin and Hans-Georg Gadamer, offer some reflections.

SYSTEMATIC KNOWLEDGE

If any generalization can be made about the academic study of language in this century it is its quest for system. Certainly the descriptive and structural linguists, with their careful analysis of the phonologic, morphologic, and syntactic subsystems of language in the tradition of Bloomfield, were located firmly in the empiricist tradition, as have been many of the transformational-generative grammarians inspired by Chomsky. Their theoretical goal has been the discovery (or invention) of linguistic structure with the practical application of teaching it to students so that their behavior (or cognitive processes) might be altered to include a more effective use of language.

Traditional grammarians, particularly those in the British tradition, have generally avoided raising abstract theoretical questions concerning their art. They proceed straight off to read the best writers, put the words they find into dictionaries and describe the sentences that contain them. The fruit of their efforts can be found in the *OED* and such estimable works as Jespersen's seven-volume and Curme's two-volume grammars of English.

Recent scholarship on language, more often than not influenced by the French scholarly tradition following Descartes, has sought a theoretical basis for the study of linguistics in a more rigorously systematic manner. It is this tradition, more than that of the grammarians, that has followed de Saussure in his effort to extract the underlying system of *langue* from the chaotic discourse found in *parole,* and to establish linguistics as a theoretical science.

Perhaps the most recent and straightforward statement of this approach has been made by Geoffrey Horrocks in his *Generative Grammar*: "A grammar must consist of a *set of rules* which define infinite classes of well-formed structures." (p. 16) Putting aside the fact that traditional grammarians might experience an urge to correct the sentence to read "a set of rules *that* define", we are presented here with an

idea about language emerging from the Saussurian tradition of the turn of the century, given perhaps its most rigorous formulation by Louis Hjelmslev in 1943, and still alive and well in the various forms of Chomskyan transformational grammar. Language is a system.

Even the functionalism of Halliday, who is among those most sensitive to the way language functions in context and wants to save *parole* from those who rush headlong into the systematizing of *langue,* is basically systemic and instrumentalist: "Language, then, is a system for making meanings. ..." (p. xvii)

To carry out their task, the systematists make use of several devices. They begin their work by "cleaning up the text"—making sure that *Wonder if he'll show* and *Think he'll come* ? are supplied with their "proper" subjects. In performing this house cleaning they regularly ignore the fact that for the contexts in which such utterances occur, the proper form might well be ridiculously inappropriate or, more importantly, might fail totally to communicate the sense of the utterance. In fact, cleaning up the text is, more often than not, a euphemism for removing the transcription of a discourse from its context and forcing it into a form that more closely fits some preconceived theory of language.

In a further effort to smooth the rough edges of the unsystematic *parole,* frequent reference is made to decontextualized sentences or utterances in their most frequent context. Some sentences are said to fit nicely into a context while others raise questions as to their grammaticality, with a significant inventory of sentences, those depending for their meaning on the complex interrelationships implicit in the actual contexts, being left out of the analysis. There is, in fact, no such thing as an utterance without a context (even when used by linguists as an example) and any attempt to stipulate a most frequent context for something that's been said begins with a presumed knowledge of the utterance's meaning—that is to say, its usage. Without empirical verification they assume a thinking subject who picks up the tool of language to construct systematically her of his meaning, ignoring the question of what pre-language the thinker is using to make decisions

about how to make use of the instrument of speech. The variety of human language strongly suggests that speech is more a consequence of linguistically acquired conventions than a result of some innate programming.

When this concept of system, with its combination of rigor and loopholes, is brought into the context of language learning, and non-native speakers are asked to apply their common sense to the task of producing cleaned-up sentences, in their most frequent context, for the approval of a native speaker, the teacher is naively requiring students to have a recondite knowledge of what they are just beginning to learn. The "systematic" teaching of English, more often than not, requires students to have acquired, on their own and somewhere else, the contextual familiarity that the teacher is demanding but not teaching.

Because of the difficulty of constructing readily learnable rules for what their careful research has shown to be the extraordinarily complex phenomenon of language, grammarians, both traditional and modern, in their writing of reference grammars find it necessary to simplify the rules to help students learn them more easily. Since all grammatical formulations are potentially complex the systematist is caught in something of a quandary. How do you construct a set of rules that is (1) theoretically accurate, (2) easily able to be internalized, and (3) consistently applicable in a complex set of contexts?

It may be instructive to look in some detail at the way language is presented to learners by those dedicated to the teaching of grammatical system, and see what the consequences are for the student.

In *A Reference Grammar for Students of English,* R. A. Close discusses the indefinite article (p. 129), one of the more difficult problems confronting those who seek an easily teachable system. "The indefinite article is *a* or *an* when the head of a nominal group is a singular count noun." Some questions arise. (And let me note here that in selecting Mr. Close's grammar for this discussion I am selecting one of the better grammars of its kind.) How do we explain to a non-native speaker such phrases as *a few oversights,* or *a dozen mistakes*? Where is the head of the

noun phrase in *A bunch of grammarians are confusing us*? How is one to understand *an exhausted five students stumbled from the classroom*? Does the simplification of the grammatical system really prepare students for an encounter with a speaker of English?

In a discussion of the use of prepositions expressing relationships in space (p. 170) we find:

> In deciding whether to use, for example, *at, on,* or *in* in the pattern—X, we must first answer the question: Is X a point, a line, a surface, or an area? The question is answered SUBJECTIVELY, not OBJECTIVELY, that is to say the answer depends on what the speaker IMAGINES X to be at the time of speaking, not how X can be measured mathematically.

What's a Japanese student going to think, after Mr. Close has explained in the same section that cars are *on* a road because it is conceived of as a line or space, when I say, *Please get in line*? And how is she or he to understand, *We're looking at Tokyo for our vacation*? Are we, as he tells us we must, imagining it to be a point on a map? What is the "systematic" explanation of such constructions as *the bedroom had a mirror on the ceiling*?

English is not spoken according to a set of rules of the sort offered above; the rule above is simply an inadequate explanation of the way English speakers use their language. And this turning up-side-down of things is traceable to the assumption that there exists a pre-linguistic subject who has an imagination capable of guiding it to the correct use of a tool for producing proper meanings.

The naivete of this sort of description is compounded by the grammarian's assumption that foreign students have the capacity to make the same subjective judgments about space as an Englishman. Not even Americans do that. Japanese judgments about space are made on the basis of what's going on within it, existence or activity, with waiting being construed as an activity, but living as a non-activity. How do Japanese learn from the explanation above how Mr. Close makes his sorts of subjective choices? Can they say, *I'm going in Tokyo*

because, at the moment of speaking, they're imagining Tokyo as an area? Or should Mr. Close actually have said in his grammatical rule that the student's choice depends upon what she or he ought to imagine, after internalizing that other set of very complex rules by which Englishmen normally imagine cities when they think about going to (but not toward, or towards) them.

Close's discussion of the subjunctive creates yet other sorts of problems. He calls it "formal and typical of official style, especially in American English." (p. 47) Putting aside the fact that a student might want to learn the usage of the majority of the speakers of the language, and say things like, *If I were in your shoes I'd drop English* or *The important thing is that he be given a better chance to learn the language,* the subjunctive is still floating around the British version of the language in informal contexts. But then perhaps foreigners aren't expected to read someone like Huxley and come across

> "If Robin were not Robin," Elizabeth used to say, "I could almost wish he were Guido." (p. 203)

Such occurrences suggest that very little that is said by grammarians about the history and geography of the subjunctive in English is of immediate use to those who have to learn it for themselves from an uncleaned up text, be it ever so carefully written.

Another, somewhat more complex, problem:

> With the full verb HAVE, we must distinguish between HAVE meaning 'hold' or 'possess', as in *That man has a gun,* and HAVE meaning something else, as in *Most people have a bath every day.* (p. 18)

A pop quiz

1. Put an X after each use of *have* that functions as the full verb meaning "hold" or "possess"; (*a*) *John has a broken arm* [ ], (*b*) *I'll have a Coke* [ ], (*c*) *We have reservations* [ ], (*d*) *They had a baby* [ ], (*e*) *She had two boyfriends* [ ].
2. In five pages, or less, explain, so that a native speaker of Hopi can clearly understand it, how to distinguish "holding" and "possessing" from all the other uses of the full verb *have.* (Ignore the

auxiliary form, which would require another ten pages, and don't bother with the problems created by sentences such as *She has interested students in her class.* And certainly don't conceive of the *has* in this sentence to mean "possess sexually.")

3. Is Mr. Close's distinction worth trying to explain to a learner of the English language?

The first two questions may create problems, but the third is a snap. The answer, if you want to continue studying with Mr. Close, is yes. What he calls "the DO operation," depends on knowing which *have* you have; e.g., *Do you have a bath every morning*? as opposed to *Have you any money on you*? The second rule is optional, so you can say *Do you have any money on you*? This second usage, generally speaking, is typical of American speech. And here is another basic problem that plague such descriptions. The grammatical rules are loaded with such qualifications as "typical" and "tend to" and "normally."

Indeed, Mr. Close uses the word "normally" in a very carefully defined way to allow his grammar to maintain its rigor. "This expression", he tells us in his preface (p. iv), "is not used loosely; it points to a norm from which deviation can occur in the haste of modern times, the continuance of regional tradition, and, especially in creative writing." Since we all live in modern times, everyone (even Elizabeth II) has a regional tradition (the Queen's English), and linguistic creativity, as anyone can tell you who's ever had a beer at a bar in Tennessee, is certainly not limited to writers or writing, we seem to be left with the distinct possibility that much of human discourse is abnormal: a fact that is often obscured when Mr. Close describes in systematic detail what may exist only in the abstract. Little consideration seems to be given by the grammarian to the effect such hedging has upon students. What are they to think when confronted with a sentence like *Do you have any money on you*? Are they to wonder if there's something abnormal going on? Such wondering cannot help but create a hesitancy that reduces fluency.

The use of the expression the "continuance of regional tradition" is

of some interest in the context of system. Here it seems to be used as a catch-all for the knotty problems of history and dialect and the existence of what in less politely academic contexts might be called sub-standard English.

To whom and why is this passage from Eudora Welty's 1941 short story "The Worn Path" abnormal?

> "My little grandson, he sit up there in the house all wrapped up, waiting by himself," Phoenix went on. "We is the only two left in the world. He suffer and it don't seem to set him back at all. He got a sweet look. He going to last. He wear a little patch quilt and peep out holding his mouth open like a little bird. I remembers so plain now. I not going to forget him again, no, the whole enduring time. I could tell him from all the others in creation."

Are we perhaps being told by Mr. Close that we should not normally enter into conversations with such people? Teaching is after all, whether we like it or not, a political activity, and we have to take responsibility for telling our students to accept or reject what Phoenix has to say to us about love.

And is it really necessary to focus so closely on the grammar of contemporary English that the following admonition to teachers, made in the mid-sixteenth century by the humanist Roger Ascham (p. 603), becomes nothing but an out-worn tool?

> Therefore, if to the goodness of nature be joined the wisdom of the teacher, in leading young wits into the right and plain way of learning; surely children, kept up in God's fear, and governed by his grace, may most easily be brought well to serve God and their country, both by virtue and wisdom.

Or should we ignore some ultra-violent time in the future, when, as in Burgess's *Clockwork Orange* (p. 5), Alex, the narrator, reflects on his and his buddies' financial situation in the following way?

> Our pockets were full of deng, so there was no real need from the point of view of crasting any more pretty polly to tolchock some old veck in an alley and viddy him swim in his blood while we counted the

takings and divided by four, nor to do the ultra-violent on some shivering starry grey-haired ptitsa in a shop and go smecking off with the till's guts. But, as they say, money isn't every thing.

Language is something that happens according to general patterns across time and space, and to offer it to students as something that works by a set of rules that apply only to the here-and-now obscures the contexts in which today's language is used. Just the other day I heard a member of Congress say on the radio, "I don't want no jive-ass law clerk goin' over my bank records." This and the passages above are no more un-English than just about any string of utterances of comparable length pulled out of the hundreds of millions of dialogues produced daily by the myriad of English speakers.

Only if one feels compelled to teach language as a system is it necessary to commit oneself so strictly to the synchronic analysis demanded by de Saussure. Ascham and Burgess say something useful in and about the English-speaking tradition. Only when we have dedicated ourselves to the inculcation of a system are the passages above any more a puzzle to the learner than a more "normally" acceptable utterance such as *I could almost wish he were Guido.* Each, to be understood, requires a knowledge of context. And it is to that end that pedagogy should be directed.

And there are innumerable places where grammarians confuse context with system. Take for example the explication of such constructions as *May I eat the pie in the oven* (laughter, or perhaps titters). This must, we are told, be corrected to *May I eat the pie that's in the oven.* But no one complains about *May I bake the pie in the oven*? much less, *May I eat the pie in the kitchen* ? where the same ambiguity exists, but only by stretching the imagination or splitting a hair.

One of the more befuddling ironies that come out of the systematic teaching and testing of language is that the loophole of normalcy is applied more often than not in only one direction. We normally say *He has a sweet look,* but woe unto her or him who produces *He got a sweet*

look—unless, of course, it was from someone else. Teachers shouldn't waste time teaching culture, the traditional grammarian's argument seems to go, but it's perfectly okay to require a knowledge of it when marking papers.

I recall an examination some years ago where I suggested to an English-educated colleague that the sentence *It was the first time for her to meet a Nigerian* might reasonably be taken as an alternative form of *It was the first time that she had ever met a Nigerian.* Her rather indignant response was, "You've been in Japan too long." It never occurred to her that in her quest for an easily teachable (and incidentally easily markable) form of English, she had ignored the North American dialect, and a speech pattern that Charles Fries fifty years before (p. 146) had found used regularly in educated speech. (I pause a moment here to permit British traditional grammarians to mutter that any collocation including "North American dialect" and "educated speech" is oxymoronic.)

Concerning the single-minded, single-styled, systematic description of English as a tool for making meaningful sentences, a comment might be made on the use of the pronoun "we", as used by Close and found in many other British textbooks. It also occurs regularly in literary criticism. In rejecting a mildly Marxist interpretation of *Hamlet,* A.C. Bradley (p. 76) tells us: "This class theory, then, we must simply reject"; the implication being, of course, that if you don't reject it, you're not one of us.

Testing what is taught can be a formidable problem. A student in a test given not long ago was presented with a copy of Leutze's *Washington Crossing the Delaware* and asked to construct a sentence including the words *center, boat, man,* and *flag.* She wrote, "The man at the center of the boat has a flag of America." A significant difference between the marking of the question by tradition grammarians and others prompted the following memo:

> Putting aside the complex problems implicit in the usage of the terms The United States, The United States of America, and America, and the

fact that the event depicted occurred some dozen years before the establishment of that nation, here are some questions that beg for answers:

1. Had she been taught that a man with respect to the center of a boat is not the same as a man with respect to the center of a circle?

2. Was she told that the noun *flag* must be classed as a different type of noun than *emblem*? Few native speakers will have trouble with *The emblem of American is an eagle encircled by stars,* for example, but the idea of *the flag of America* and its specific example *a flag of America,* while not violating any rules of grammar, is—how would the traditional grammarian put it?—not English.

3. Is there an easy way to explain to the student why this construction is abnormal in the singular, but normal in the plural; *e.g., The flags of America, Great Britain, and France are all composed of the colors red, white, and blue?*

4. Did we explain to her that, even though the use of *have* employed here has the meaning of "hold" or "possess", these meanings are not, in the context of men in boats and flags, interchangeable, unless, of course, she adds the phrase *in his hand* some place around the end of the sentence.

5. Shouldn't we have explained that even when the *have* means "hold", and they are interchangeable, as in the sentences *The mountain climber had an alpenstock* and *The mountain climber held an alpenstock* their contextual implications are different?

6. In the give-and-take of modern speech, does the usage *a flag* tend to be more normal than *the flag* in this context? (I'm leaving aside here the more complex problem of *the man,* since the way we talk about what's going on in a picture is quite different from the way we talk about events. Conf. "In that picture the man is holding a flag," and "When Washington crossed the Delaware one of the men in the boat was holding a flag," or "there was a man in the boat [who was] holding a flag," or "the flag," if you want to think about it that way.)

7. More generally, if we test students on their capacity to employ the rules of grammar, shouldn't all of our test questions be limited to the rules we've taught?

8. If we require of our students a familiarity with the culture of English speakers, shouldn't we have taught them the culture?

9. If we are going to be asked to grade such "understandable" sentences as this, isn't it reasonable that we develop a set of quidelines about when we're testing for the proper employment of grammati-

cal rules and when for a familiarity with the culture?

10. In the marking of examinations how much should we penalize our students for the inadequacies of our teaching methods?

Shall we return, for the final time, to the grammar of *have,* as it's used here and described by Mr. Close? If someone says to you, *My girlfriend has long eyelashes,* Close's description is of little help. What is required, in fact, is the creation of a context for girlfriends and eyelashes and the possession by the one of the other. To do otherwise, that is to say, to start from a "grammatical" comprehension of the utterance, would require one to treat as a confusingly ambiguous sentence one that might quite "normally" (in terms of statistical occurrence or some other decontextualized criterion) be taken as analogous to *My brother has long shoelaces,* where the usage of *has* is quite different; unless, of course, my girlfriend collects long eyelashes and keeps them in a little box in her top bureau drawer. (I'm leaving aside here the abnormal fact that my brother may have a bureau drawer full of long shoelaces rather than that today he's wearing shoelaces that trail on the ground.) All of these usages, one might note in passing, operate in quite a different set of contexts than those for the Japanese *motsu.*

Since this same problem—which comes first, the grammatical chicken or the contextual egg?—exists for the vast bulk of English verbs, it is not unreasonable to conclude that there is no teachable way to get from a systematic description of a language to the way it is used in discourse, any more than one can translate "systematically" from one language to another. All one can do is wait until a discourse has come to what appears to be a stopping point and at that juncture pass judgment on its effectiveness. The traditional grammarians get things backwards when they assume that students can learn fluency through the application of rules. Even a superficial observation of what students do suggests that it is far more likely that they acquire an understanding of grammatical structure through a familiarity with the contexts in which it is used. Fluent speakers recognize the ambiguity of a sentence

such as *Visiting relatives can be fun* not because they perceive two possible grammatical forms, but because they live in a language that gives this utterance two possible contexts. Were it the other way around, the sentence *I enjoy visiting museums* would be equally problematic, especially for someone who grew up in a community that had a visiting library. But the potential ambiquity is discarded by the fluent user of the language because she or he comprehends context. This sort of problem is to the hearer what *a flag of America* is to the speaker. They are both instances of putting grammatical analysis before contextual comprehension. For this reason, the teaching of grammar is not so much an effort to give the student an accurate description of a coherent system that has been muddled by idiosyncratic behavior as it is the systematic killing and dissecting by theory-builders of that infinitely rich flux of human interaction called dialogue.

DIALOGICAL UNDERSTANDING

In the last few years a competing conceptualization of language has been gaining recognition. Its position is in direct conflict with those committed to discovery, precise articulation, and teaching of linguistic systems. It stands de Saussure on his head. It is not, as he claims, *langue* with its system that gives meaning to language, but rather *parole,* with all its irregularities, inconsistencies, and fluctuations, that supplies us with the context from which we derive linguistic meaning.

Using arguments familiar to Americans through the relativism of the Whorf Hypothesis and its denial of linguistic universals, this new position takes its inspiration from the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975) and his dialogic principle, and is brought into the mainstream of Continental thought by the hermeneutist Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–) and his concept of language as play.

In an article on language and its treatment by the human sciences (1979, pp. 302–3), Bakhtin sums up his reservations concerning the efficacy of linguistic theory:

> To simplify things somewhat: purely linguistic relations (that is, the object of linguistics) are the relations of a sign to another sign or to other signs (that is, all systematic or linear relations between signs). The relations between utterances and reality, the actually speaking subject and other real utterances, relations that alone make utterances true or false, beautiful, etc., can never become the object of linguistics.

And again in the reworking of his book on Dostoevsky (1984, pp. 293) he writes:

> The dialogical nature of consciousness. The dialogic nature of human life itself. The single adequate form for *verbally expressing* authentic human life is the *open-ended dialogue.* Life by its very nature is dialogic. To live means to participate in dialogue: answer questions, to heed, to respond, to agree, and so forth. In this dialogue a person participates wholly and throughout his whole life: with his eyes, lips, hands, soul, spirit, with his whole body and deeds. He invests his entire self in discourse, and this discourse enters into the dialogic fabric of human life, into the world symposium.

This recentering of scholarly attention away from the individual learning a system to the community taking put in symposia has the potential for altering significantly what is done in the foreign language classroom.

For one thing it means the abandonment of the idea of language as an instrument with which speakers structure their linguistic meanings. Gadamer (pp. 62–3) views the issue this way:

> Language is by no means simply an instrument, a tool. For it is in the nature of the tool that we master its use, which is to say we take it in hand and lay it aside when it has done its service....Such an analogy is false because we never find ourselves as consciousness over against the world and, as it were, grasp after a tool of understanding in a wordless condition. Rather, in all our knowledge of ourselves and in all our knowledge of the world, we are always already encompassed by the language that is our own. We grow up, and we become acquainted with men and in the last analysis with ourselves when we learn to speak. Learning to speak does not mean learning to use a preexistent tool for designating a world already somehow familiar to us; it means acquiring a familiarity and acquaintance with the world itself and how it confronts us.

In this extension of Heidegger's view of language, Gadamer is articulating an attitude toward language that focuses not on the notion of system but on our active participation in it. For him, language is best seen as a game, a game played with certain basic ground rules but one that is, as in our experience with sporting events, unique in every one of its occurrences. And it is this uniqueness that the student must learn to cope with.

Without attempting to argue further the untenability of taking language to be a systematic instrument for the production of meaning, suffice it to say that there is a long tradition, finding many of its most articulate statements in the writings of the pragmatist William James, whose experience at Harvard at the end of the last century led him to conclude that the quest for system and scientific certainty was a profound impediment to creative action, moving the focus of our attention away from the task at hand. Bakhtin, whose life in Stalinist Russia led him to search for a effective means of circumventing the monolithic, determinist structure of the state, offers a non-deterministic, anti-theoretic view of experience that directs our free will to the immediate context of discourse. Such pragmatism, brought into the classroom by the educational philosophy of John Dewey, stands in direct contrast to the static predictability of system and offers a position from which the student can begin the practice of creative and spontaneous dialogue.

SOME REFLECTIONS

If we adopt a dialogic view of language, grammar ceases to be an indispensable instrument for the accurate encoding and decoding of meaningful messages, and is better conceived of as a schema for the mapping of one aspect of the complexities of linguistic phenomena—a map capable of specifying the overall spatial location of things, but soon revealed to be far from useful on any but the basic level of static locality. It can show with total accuracy the location of Tokyo station, and even (if detailed enough) pinpoint for us the location of the ticket window, the track, and the location of our seat in our coach. It will, however, be

useless for telling us how to buy a ticket, when the train to Kyoto leaves, and whether or not the person sitting next to us will be a delightful conversationalist. I would take the position that the traditional grammarian and the empirical linguist have focused their attention incorrectly on the subtle refinement of such a map while ignoring the more fundamentally important playing out of experience that takes place within its borders.

Yes, a map is indispensable for getting around Tokyo with ease. It would be naive, however, to assume that by sharpening the detail on the map or our skill at reading it, we can come to understand any of the causes, implications, and consequences of some planned trip for which the map is to be a guide.

This analogy points up the fact that a knowledge of a hypothetically accurate system is quite a different thing from an understanding of the activity that takes place in the context described by it. A thorough knowledge of, let us say, the subway system of Tokyo, while permitting us to talk accurately about the manner in which transportation is arrayed, is totally incapable of saying anything significant about where a particular traveller is going or where she or he has come from. It tells us nothing of the purposes and consequences of the activity. Nor does it in any way reflect the effect of one person's travel on the travel of others.

At the beginning of each semester, students quite regularly come to my office and say "Report card," perhaps with the rising intonation pattern of a question—this after one or two years of being told that singular countable nouns require some sort of determiner and that the object of an English verb tends "normally" to follow a verb.

The important thing here is not, of course, that the students have not made a "grammatical mistake" in the strict sense of the word. (Had I asked them "What is the meaning of the word *seisekihyō* in English," their utterance might well be taken as a correct classroom response by a traditional grammarian.) It was less a grammatical mistake than a mistake in context. They had made the reasonable but incorrect as-

sumption that the Japanese practice of stating the topic of an obvious question in a mutually understood context would supply to the speaker of English enough information to generate a comprehensible segment of dialogue. A basic problem of most contemporary language teaching is that teachers expend a great deal of energy trying to give "grammatical" solutions to such problems rather than guiding students to use their limited inventory of foreign utterances to meet the expectations of the community they're being trained to share experiences with.

Again, a student of mine who was late in getting in a written assignment explained her tardiness by saying, "My glass is broken." This sentence is, of course, grammatically correct and usable whenever the thing one's talking about is for drinking, and is assignable to that context by a very complex set of practices that establish the usage of countable and uncountable nouns, their number, the grammatical concept "possessive," etc. The student, needless to say, was attempting to produce something like "I broke my glasses.", and had failed to get it right because English is rather inconsistent about the contemporary word for spectacles. They are called glasses because they unite in one object two lenses of glass, but even if you break just one of the lenses, you usually report that you broke your glasses. The student didn't need another lesson in grammar; she needed a few undisturbed moments of solitude in which to muster up her strength for a renewed assault on a language that requires its speakers to internalize so much complicated information to talk about something that in a Japanese context poses no greater problem than a pen.

Another similar example: a student explaining why she was late for class announced forlornly, "My wheel's flat." Here, I heard it both as a mistake and as a correct response. As a native speaker of English who as a youth had spent several summer vacations with my cousin in upstate New York, where the word *wheel* meant bicycle, I accepted quite nostalgically a synecdochic construction for *My bicycle's tire is flat.* (Language, you see, is diachronic, even for the contemporary speaker.) My response as a teacher was to ask "Oh, your tire's flat?" She then said

she was sorry, I explained that she didn't have to be, and that I was sorry about her bike, and the class moved on.

Such classroom exchanges are dialogically significant. Classroom responses, such as my student's translation of *sumimasen* into "I'm sorry", have no function in the English language context and impede the process of language-learning. To assume that a translation of *sumimasen* will achieve in English what it gets done in Japanese, is to act under the naive assumption that all cultures function like one's own. A similar breakdown in discourse occurs when students respond to questions with what in Japanese is polite silence. Without a knowledge of culture they have no way of knowing that in America silence is either an expression of animosity or a sign of idiocy or both.

But there are far greater complexities in the maintenance of intercultural dialogue. The other day on a street in Shibuya I heard one well-dressed and soft-spoken young lady say to another: "*Gaijin da kara, shikata ga nai,*" a not infrequently heard construction in Tokyo and one that might under some circumstances be translated, "He's a foreigner, so it can't be helped." I didn't pick up from the intonation any slur implied by the use of *gaijin* where in a more formal setting (perhaps in a conversation with me) she might have used the form *gaikokujin.* What I heard was a segment of a dialogue that gave every indication of being a casual comment made by one educated young lady to another.

After they had passed by and it became clear that I'd never learn the context for the utterance, the linguist in me began to ponder the possible translations of what I had heard. "He (I, you [singular], she, we, you [plural], or they) is (are) a foreigner (foreigners), so nothing (conceived in the singular or plural) can [possibly could, would, or even should] be done (by him, me, you, us, you, them) (concerning him, me, you, us, you, them, or himself, myself, yourself, ourselves, yourselves, themselves, or it or them [neuter])." To this must be added, of course, the determination of whether the foreigner is or is not one of the members of the dialogue and whether the person unable to do anything is either one or both of the members of the dialogue or a third person, either

singular or plural, male or female, foreign or otherwise. What I had done, it seems, is comprehended a sentence without being able to say much of anything about what it meant.

But the untranslatability (in any practical sense) of the otherwise simple statement is not what is of central importance here. We need only observe in passing that without a context there is no formal, systematic, that is to say grammatical way of getting from "*Gaijin da kara, shikata ga nai,*" to any verifiably correct English utterance, or for that matter any Japanese paraphrase. What is far more important dialogically is how what we may want to call the "most similar English sentence" is used in an English-speaking context. Setting aside the reasonable, but not very likely, context of young women talking about an alien friend who had applied for employment with a government agency and learned that citizenship was one of the requirements for the post (a context in which a Japanese might more likely use *Gaikokujin*, the more official-sounding term for an alien, even in an informal situation), and where an English translation such as "He's a foreigner, so it can't be helped" would not be out of place, there are only rare social situations where in an English context one can talk about things not being able to be done because the person involved is a foreigner. In fact, such a context and its underlying implications are unable to be transposed (can "translated" be used here ?) into English.

One might reasonably expect from an ill-educated bigot some comment such as "Whadya expect ? He's a foreigner"; but one would not expect it from an American with a modicum of social sense. It would, of course, be reasonable to hear "What do you expect ? He's an Italian," where the context is some romantic overture, and the remark is made in good humor as a comment on the proverbially romantic nature of Italians (or where the conversation is about an English gentleman, and he spoke interminably about the weather without ever getting around to making a pass), but for any native speaker of English to lump all foreigners together as people about whom some negative generalization can be made, would suggest a distinct lack of breeding—something not

necessarily suggested by the Japanese. (I leave aside here the possibility that the usage of the word *gaijin* in Japanese may in fact be a manifestation of the insensitivity of certain of its users to the conventions of international dialogue.)

The point of all this is that the game playing of one language has no precise equivalent in another. Japanese requires the registration of a level of politeness but pays little attention to how many things are being discussed. English strives to have things neatly counted but has only a passing interest in the status of the people being talked about or to. The French and the Germans wonder why the English and the Japanese pay so little attention to the gender of things. When we say we've translated something into an second language what we mean is that we've produced a fuzzy paraphrase that other bi-lingual speakers are willing, perhaps grudgingly, to accept as adequate. And to this must be added that even when a speaker and a hearer are both familiar with the language, there is no reason to assume that because something is readily comprehended its meaning is understood, as with the anecdote about the *gaijin*.

And finally, and for many the most difficult to swallow, any language-teaching that ignores or pays only minimal attention to the dialogical function of language in an attempt to develop systematic skills is failing to train students to use a language. An understanding of the contextual meaning precedes linguistic comprehension.

The present grammar-based pedagogical methods don't work, and to reteach Engligh grammar the same way yet again can be nothing but counter-productive. Our students didn't learn to speak English in high school because what they were taught didn't facilitate their acquisition of the skills necessary to speak the language fluently in a context. They don't have to know grammar better; they have to get the hang of seeing the world in an English way and formulating their thoughts in a way that is appropriate to an English dialogue. Getting sentences just right can be attended to when they can talk about doing things.

Not too long ago in an interview with a reporter from *The Japan*

Times, Professor Randolph Quirk recalled sitting in on an English class in Spain and being appalled when the instructor failed to correct a student who created something along the lines of "She teached me English." It seems it never occurred to Mr. Quirk that the teacher, at that particular time and place, was less interested in preserving the purity of the Queen's English than getting the Spaniard to put his or her ideas more fluently into the general pattern of English. One can't help but wonder if such grammarians are more concerned with the language they have written a grammar for than with the students who are trying to learn it.

From the nod of a head to Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France,* utterances are responses to context, expressions not only of an individual's ideas, but reflections of an entire culture. It is the goal of language pedagogy (or should be) to develop in the student a fluent familiarity with the sorts of exchange that happen in the language he or she wants to speak. This is begun by the teacher helping the student to become familiar with the shape of the basic notions of the language. Ultimately what the student learns, from her or his sketchy road map and lots of experience, is how to play a role in the dialogues of the language being studied. And that process never ends.

More than a century ago Basil Hall Chamberlain suggested to his students of Japanese that they walk around Tokyo making up sentences in pidgin Japanese: "As for that book, one volume, is wanted." While the practice does violence to both English and Japanese, it does wonders for getting one's head to think the way it has to if you're going to be understood. Had he "teached" his students wrong?

A frequent justification for the teaching of system is that even if it were better for students to use language in context, there is rarely enough time in the academic year to offer sufficient exposure. Of course, so the argument continues, it would be best if our students could participate in dialogues everyday, but since they can't we should do the next best thing and give them more grammar. But is it the next best thing? I'd suggest it's one of the worst. It reinforces the questionable

assumption that a rational comprehension of a grammatical system contributes to one's being able to use the khowledge of that system as a tool for the production of meaning. It's comforting to think that more grammatical knowledge can yield greater linguistic facility, but a more likely explanation of the matter is just the other way around; a fuller dialogic understanding of context will result in a better comprehension of grammatical relationships. In fact, most successful students who learn English in the traditional classroom are students who have, on their own, gotten the hang of the dialogic process.

A good number of language teachers begin each academic year dedicated to the systematic teaching of grammar rather than that fuzzy thing called culture—"This week we're going to learn how to use the determiners of English." You may notice, as I have, that not infrequently these knowledgeable and hard working pedagogues end the term by pronouncing their students unteachable dolts. Not only theories, it seems, but also those who espouse them, are able to get things the wrong way round.

Both theoretically and practically, the complexities inherent in the use of English language for Japanese are not going to be solved by assuming a grammatical system and a list of words, and then teaching them as a tool for sentence construction. It's going to be solved by students who want to involve themselves in alien dialogues and teachers who, by constructing useful cultural contexts, help them enter into those dialogues. If there isn't enough class time to get students involved in dialogues, the solution is certainly not the shrinking of that time even further by teaching things that don't contribute to the goal of fluency.

The traditional grammarian more often than not will, at this juncture, concede that a comprehension of culture at some level is necessary for the use of language. But, they will hasten to add, since the teaching of "culture" is a complex task beyond the capacities of most instructors, we (especially we non-native speakers) had best stick to teaching language by means of the tried and true methods. Agreed. Creating

contexts for imaginative dialogues is more complex than assigning exercises or drilling patterns, but that doesn't validate the ineffectiveness of the method, it merely sets us (or should set us) to the task of finding better ways to get students to acquire fluency. If one feels uneasy about constructing contexts, base classroom activity on the dialogues that appear in well-written works of fiction. Good writers produce good dialogues.

Again, when I downplay the study of grammar and translation I am not suggesting that they are not valuable academic subjects. At the earliest stages of language study they are indispensable, and at the advanced level they are, for certain students, going to be objects of the most acute scholarly interest. Certainly one of the functions of the English language is to produce lucidly articulated texts inscribed in an impeccably clear style, but where is it written that this is the only purpose, or the most important, or the one that must be achieved in the second, third, or even fourth year of instruction? Rather than drilling our students in the patterns that fit the systematizing pedagogue's limited and limiting view of language, we might better help them develop the fuzzier mind-set that makes English speakable.

Tatami no ue no suiren, goes the Japanese proverb, reminding us not to spend too much time on the tatami practicing how to swim. While no one would deny the necessity of offering the beginning student a comforting set of basic patterns of English, there comes a time, sooner—I would urge—than later, that she or he should be set adrift in the current of living English dialogues and invited to swim. Those that can't stay afloat can climb ashore and become well-paid office workers, those who get the hang of thinking English can use their fluency to do the thousand and one things that people do when they can speak a second language. But to spend years teaching college students decontextualized rules for a language they can't speak can have no other consequence than tatami-burns on the stomach.

My point in all this is to argue that, between John (subj.) loves (vb.) Mary (obj.) and the translation and analysis of a poem by Dylan Thomas,

there is a career's worth of work for anyone who wants to help students learn how to participate in dialogues with speakers of English.

CONCLUSION

Language is a cultural activity. Indeed if some contemporary scholars are correct, language is culture. If a speaker is ignorant of a culture he wants to converse in he will be unable—no matter how well trained in the grammar of the language—to participate in its dialogues. There are no grammatical rules that require a speaker of English not to produce *My glass is broken* when one of the lenses of a pair of classes is cracked, or *He's a foreigner, so it can't be helped,* when an alien is in a quandary, or silence in the context of a question. These all fail to be English because they are not part of what Bakhtin calls the culture's dialogue, that thing that has to be internalized (through the language) before language can function effectively. It's all a matter of the pragmatics of human interaction.

We may take pride in our capacity to look at constructions such as *She teached me English,* or *My wheel's flat* or *He got a sweet look* or *kept up in God's fear* or *go smecking off with the till's guts,* hold them up to our grammatical system, and pronounce them to be improper instruments for the production of meaning, but what do we accomplish by doing this? We may frighten our students into speaking as little as possible lest they make a mistake, and thereby preserve the purity of the English language; but we will not acquaint them with the simple fact that language is not a right or wrong sort of thing, that it's a fuzzy thing that gets its shape from the contexts in which it is used—that is to say from the dialogues of the culture.

The fuzziness that is the nature of dialogue ought not frighten the teacher away from bringing the dialogic approach to the teaching of a foreign language. To teach a foreign language as a rigorously systematic tool may simplify instruction, but when viewed from the other side of the desk it turns out to be doubly difficult. First, students must learn the complex set of rules that "normally" govern the creation of correct

sentences, and then they have to learn the exceptions that are required by the cultural context, exceptions that they have never been taught because their teacher finds culture too fuzzy.

This is not to say that students don't have to "learn" languages; but to argue that the inculcation of the grammatical system as a tool is not the way to "teach" it. The capacity to speak a language is achieved when one gets the hang of how a culture organizes its understanding of the world, how it carries on its dialogues, how it plays its games.

In the pragmatic context of the classroom, there is, of course, no simple choice between system and dialogue. Most students will need some sort of guidelines at the very beginning of their learning, and many serious students of language will continue to delve deeply into the grammar of things long after they are fluent in a foreign language. But for the overwhelming majority of students, during most of their training in a foreign language, the focus of their attention, and that of everyone whose task it is to help them, should be the ever-moving, continually changing, unsystematic dialogue by which speakers of a language share the meanings of their experience.

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